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NOTICE TO CONTRIBUTORS

Prospective contributors should refer to the detailed Notice to Contributors that appears in the Summer 1987 issue of POQ.

THE GROWTH OF THE FEDERAL DEFICIT AND THE ROLE OF PUBLIC ATTITUDES

ANDRE MODIGLIANI AND
FRANCO MODIGLIANI

Abstract How can the recent explosion in the fiscal deficit of the United States be reconciled with the well-known support of the American public for fiscal conservatism? It is first shown that the reputation for fiscal conservatism is fully supported by public opinion polls dating back over a period of four decades. Solid majorities have consistently opposed tax reductions that might produce an unbalanced budget. Recently, however, the public has also shown strong opposition to increases in taxes to close the fiscal gap, which might appear to imply a new acquiescence to the deficit. But this opposition, too, is shown to have persisted for a long time and to be not logically inconsistent with rejecting tax cuts resulting in deficit. Another fashionable explanation for the deficit holds that the budget process in a democratic society is biased toward deficit because the cost of higher taxes is immediate while the cost of deficit is delayed. But it is inconsistent with the fiscal history of the United States over the last 100 years, which reveals no systematic bias toward deficits, at least until recent years. The major explanation that emerges is that the administration succeeded in misleading the public (and perhaps even itself) into believing that the tax cut would not result in deficit thanks to "supply" and "Laffer curve" effects.

The Issues

Since President Reagan's phased tax-reduction program first began to take effect in 1982, the United States has been incurring federal deficits approaching 5% of the gross national product. It is widely recognized that this wholesale abandonment of orthodox balanced budget policies is building up to one of the most serious economic issues facing the

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United States. When receipts do not cover current expenditures and the government is forced to tap private saving to make up the difference, the bill is passed on to future generations who will enjoy a smaller after-tax income because of the taxes they will have to pay to service the debt or, equivalently, because of the smaller stock of capital at their disposal. In addition, the deficit has immediate adverse effects by raising interest rates, thereby also causing an appreciation of the exchange rate, which in turn results in a foreign trade deficit.

Actually, the deficits seem to antedate Reagan. According to official statistics, the budget has been in the red every single year since 1970, and in 11 of these 17 years it has exceeded 2% of GNP. This phenomenon is a very surprising one, considering that the American public has long been reputed to be very conservative in fiscal matters and might be expected to elect like-minded representatives (Cantril and Free, 1968; Gallup, 1978:75).

There are two issues that seem worth investigating. First, how well-founded is the public's reputation for fiscal conservatism in the light of evidence provided by public opinion polls. Second, if it is confirmed, then how could such a reckless fiscal policy come into existence and be so passively tolerated for so long.

Evidence of Public Opposition to Deficits

With respect to the issue of fiscal conservatism, one of the striking episodes supporting this proposition goes back to the early presidency of John Kennedy, some 25 years ago. It was during the economic showdown of 1962 that Kennedy, despite some current deficit, proposed a reduction of taxes to stimulate the economy and help restore full employment (Kennedy, 1962). Congressional reaction was far from enthusiastic and, in the end, the president was unable to get his proposal through Congress. It was widely held that this performance reflected the opposition of the public. This is confirmed by the result of a Gallup poll conducted in June 1962. Confronted with the question "Would you favor or oppose a cut in federal income taxes at this time, if a cut meant the government would go further into debt?" fully 72% of those polled were opposed, with only 19% in favor (Gallup, 1972 [Q13][1]).[2]

1. All opinion items referred to in the text are listed in the Appendix in chronological order, numbered Q1 to Q28. Both exact wording and marginal distribution are shown.
2. The lopsided opposition to tax cuts seen here is not found on items phrased so as to omit any suggestion that a tax reduction might further unbalance the budget. In September 1963, for example, when Gallup asked simply, "Do you favor or oppose a cut in income taxes now?" 60% indicated they were in favor (Gallup, 1972 [Q16]). Similarly

But the evidence of opposition to tax cuts financed by deficit is by no means limited to the Kennedy episode, as can be inferred from the reply to questions similar to the above which were posed on several occasions prior to 1962. Thus, in August 1946, in connection with the winding down of the war effort, respondents were asked "Which do you think is more important to do in the coming year—balance the budget or cut income taxes?" Seventy-one percent thought it was more important to balance the budget, with only 20% giving priority to the tax cut (Gallup, 1972 [Q1]). The issue was posed again in a pair of 1953 surveys. In the first (January), respondents were asked "If the new Congress finds that it cannot balance the budget for this year and at the same time reduce income taxes, which do you think it should try to do first?" Again, 67% wanted the budget to be balanced first, with only 26% giving priority to a tax cut (Gallup, 1972 [Q8]). In the second survey (July), the question was worded in a somewhat different and more complex fashion, and although there was once again a substantial majority against a tax cut, it was less lopsided—52% opposed and 36% in favor (Gallup, 1972 [Q10]). Thus, at least as far back as 1946 the public showed a consistent, strong opposition to voting itself a tax cut financed by deficit, with the opposition running typically around 70%.

A further indication of opposition to deficit spending is to be found in the public's strong support of a constitutional amendment to balance the federal budget. In a series of surveys conducted between March 1976 and July 1985, the percent in favor of such an amendment was typically between 65% and 81% (Gallup, 1978, 1979; Gallup International, 1980, 1981, 1985 [Q17, Q19, Q20, Q27]). In an analysis of some of these surveys, Blinder and Holtz-Eakin (1984) confirm that support for the amendment is substantially rooted in fiscal conservatism.

Perhaps even more striking evidence of such conservatism comes from responses to three surveys conducted between 1946 and 1956 in which respondents were asked what to do with an actual or potential budget surplus—should it be used to cut taxes or to reduce the national debt? The percentage who favored reducing the debt rather than taxes is amazingly high; it actually represents a plurality in two of the sur-

worded items posed by Katona and his colleagues, between August 1962 and August 1963, produced similar levels of support for a tax cut (Katona et al., 1964:201 [Q14, Q15]). Evidently, alternative wordings that omit reference to potential budget deficits tend to shift the issue from one of *national* well-being to one of *personal* well-being. As Katona notes in a recent review of the 1962–63 period, ". . . the majority of Americans agreed it would be best for *them* to pay lower taxes, but bad for the country. 'I'd like to pay lower taxes' and 'the government can't afford it' were two frequent responses" (Katona, 1981:7). Since in the present paper we are primarily concerned with people's assessment of the national implications of tax cuts rather than with their perception of its purely proximate consequences, and since many people evidently can have both levels in mind, items making explicit reference to potential deficits clearly provide the better indicator.

veys (53% versus 38% in April 1947 and 49% versus 43% in January 1956) and close to half in the other (44% versus 48% in November 1946) (Gallup, 1972 [Q2, Q3, Q11]).

We can conclude, then, that evidence of public opposition to tax cuts leading to deficits is overwhelming. This makes the question of why deficits have recently been so high a very perplexing one.

Are Democratic Governments Deficit-Prone?

Not surprisingly, this question has elicited the interest of several authors and has led to a number of theories. One widely held view is that a bias toward budget deficit is built into our system of budget making and can only be eliminated by adoption of some form of constitutional amendment. The best known advocate of this view, James Buchanan, has asserted, "Fiscal prudence simply cannot be made to pay off in democracy" (Buchanan, 1985:217). The reason is that "deficits allow politicians to increase spending without having directly and forthrightly to raise taxes. There is little obstacle to such a policy. Surpluses, on the other hand, require government to raise taxes without increasing spending—a program far more capable of generating political opposition than budget deficits" (Buchanan and Wagner, 1978:4–5). Furthermore, according to Buchanan the tendency to deficits has greatly increased in the postwar era because of the Keynesian revolution. This is not because Keynes favored deficits, but rather because he overthrew the previous "Victorian fiscal morality" embodied "in the long standing rules for fiscal–monetary prudence . . . [that] were required to hold the tribal instinct in check" (Buchanan, 1985:192).

Unfortunately, these bold hypotheses do not find much support in the historical record of the federal budget. Figure 1 illustrates this point by exhibiting the fiscal deficit or surplus in percent of GNP for the last 100 years (1887 to 1986). It includes every year except major wars (1917–1919 and 1941–1945) and the Great Depression (1931–1940)—leaving a total of 82 years of observations. It is apparent that at least up to 1970, a period of 65 years, there is no evidence whatever of an inherent bias toward deficits. If we call a budget in balance as long as the surplus relative to GNP is within, say, plus or minus one-half of one percent, one finds that in over half of these years—33 out of 65—the budget shows no significant departure from balance. The remaining years include 10 significant deficits, but these are more than offset by no less than 22 years of significant surplus. Clearly, Congress and the administration succeeded pretty well in steering away from deficits. This was in the absence of any constitutional requirement—simply a result of good government and, presumably, of public opinion pressure.

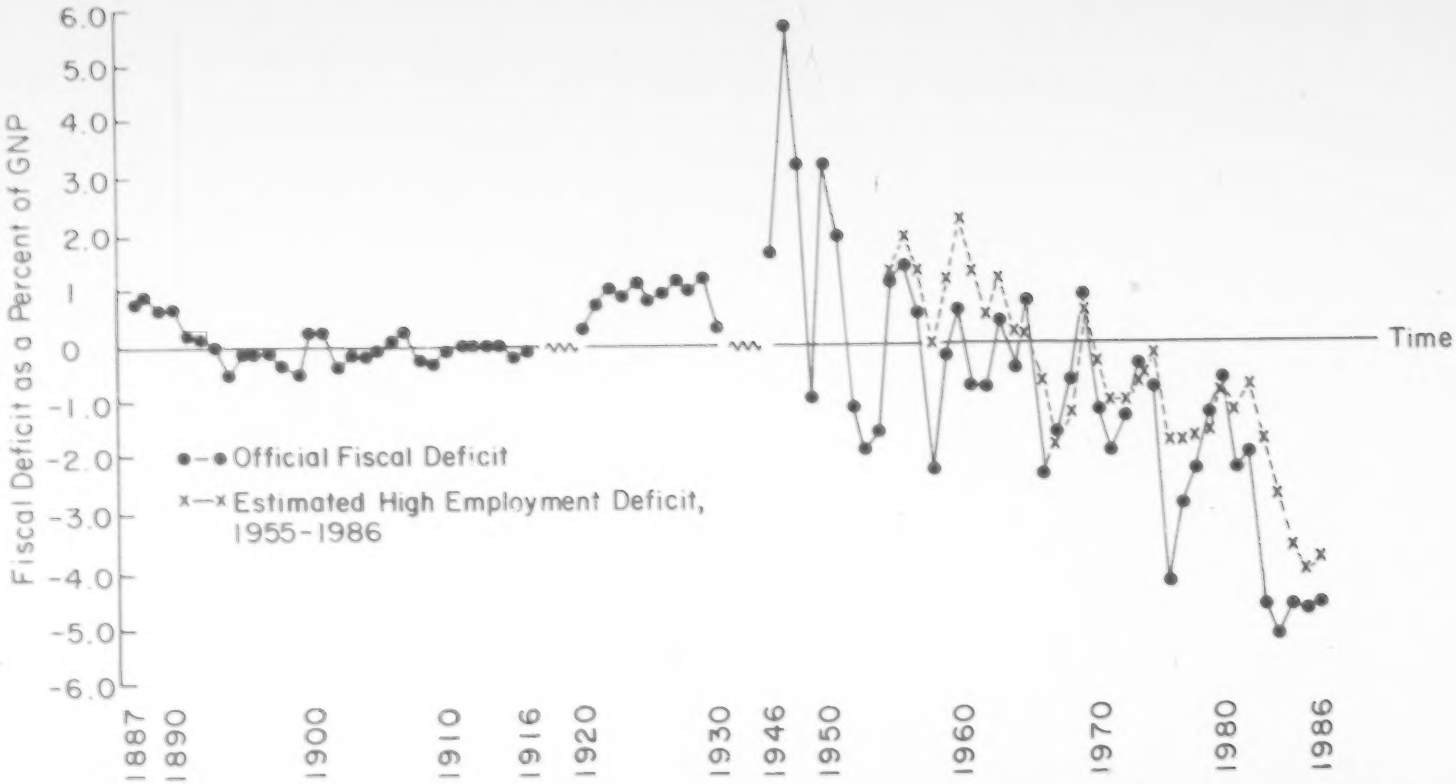

Figure 1. The Fiscal Deficit or Surplus of the United States over the Last Century (Percent of GNP). SOURCES: *Official Fiscal Deficit: 1887–1954*, U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1971:224 (table, series F1-5), 1104–1105 (table, series Y335–342); *1955–1984*, Eisner 1986:196, table B11; *1985*, Economic Report of the President, 1986, table B78; *1986*, Ibid., estimated from fiscal year deficit. *Estimated High Employment Deficit: 1955–1975*, Eisner, 1986:87, table 8.3, col. 2; *1976–1986*, Holloway, 1986:17, table 6, col. 7.

This story, however, is incomplete in one sense. An examination of the graph will reveal that the frequency of deficits tended to increase in time. Thus, in the 41 years preceding the Great Depression, from 1887 to 1930 (but excluding 1917–1919), there were 27 years of no significant imbalance, or over two-thirds; moreover, there was but one barely significant deficit, while there were 13 years of significant surpluses. Thus, in this initial period there was a definite bias, but in favor of surplus, suggesting an extremely conservative approach to the budget. Between 1946 and 1969 the fiscal stance appears to take a less conservative turn, as there are only 6 years in which the imbalance is less than 1/2 percent and as many as 9 years of deficits in excess of that limit. This would seem consistent with the Buchanan (1985) hypothesis. However, this appearance is misleading because it reflects, at least in part, the striking increase in the variability of the fiscal balance since the end of World War II. But this greater variability, in turn, is but the expected outcome of the enormous growth in the size of the government budget relative to GNP. At the beginning of the period, in 1887, expenditures represented less than 2.5% of GNP, and by 1930 it had grown only to less than 3%. But by 1946 it had jumped to nearly 17.5%. The rise has continued even beyond 1946 but at a modest pace, reaching not quite 25% by the end of the period. The growth implies that the same relative short fall of receipts as compared with outlays would result in a much larger deficit, relative to GNP, in the period after 1946 than before. Thus, to make the pre- and post–World War II figures more nearly comparable, one should broaden the range outside of which an imbalance is regarded as significant. If, accordingly, we raise the limits for a significant imbalance to plus or minus 1%—which corresponds roughly to an imbalance in excess of 5% of expenditure—then one finds that also between 1946 and 1969, 13 years, or more than half, do not show significant imbalances; furthermore, the number of years of significant deficits is down to 5 and is more than balanced by 6 years of significant surplus. In addition, most of the 5 deficits have special causes, as explained below.

However, when we come to the last 16 years, we find a remarkably different story. Even using the 1% standard, significant deficits occur in all but 3 years, without a single year of significant surplus to offset them.

The 1970 Break—A Shift in Public Opinion?

How can one account for this rather abrupt major change? Could it be that a significant shift has occurred between the 1960s and the 1970s in public attitudes in the form of reduced qualms about budget deficits

and a concomitant greater willingness to shift the current cost of government to future generations? There is certainly some prima facie support for this hypothesis. A particularly striking piece of evidence is the overwhelming opposition expressed by the public in recent years to higher taxes as a means for reducing the deficit. Thus, as early as November 1981, Gallup confronted respondents with a forecast of a 1982 deficit of $80 to $100 billion and asked them "Do you think there should or should not be an increase Federal Income Taxes to help reduce the deficit?" The reply was an overwhelming rejection of tax increases—70% against versus 19% in favor. Similarly worded questions were asked seven times between January 1983 and January 1986 with rather similar results: the proportion opposing tax increases ranged between 79% and 67%, while that approving was between 14% and 29% (Gallup International, 1983, 1985, 1986 [Q22, Q24, Q28]).

One could readily find a variety of explanations for this recent seeming shift in public attitudes. One appealing explanation could be based on the growth of a social and psychological malaise that Christopher Lasch (1978) has called the "new narcissism." According to this view of the recent evolution of American society, increasing parental ineptitude at raising children has combined with the overwhelming social problems of our contemporary society to breed a new sense of helplessness which, in turn, has produced a compensatory, narcissistic drive oriented to obtaining quick, personal gratification. "We become disinclined to settle for anything less than everything—all at once and at this very moment" (Coles, 1979:104). In the present context, it is the selfish, wholly inconsiderate aspect of narcissism that is of relevance. If this form of social and psychological disturbance has been on the increase, it is clear that those who are under its sway would not be inclined to renounce current gratification even if at the expense of future generations. Attention has also been directed to the recent spread of credit cards that has spawned an enjoy-now–pay-later philosophy.

While these explanations for the change in attitude are ingenious and appealing, we suggest that they can be rejected on one basic ground: as we shall presently show, there is no evidence of significant change in public attitudes toward deficit spending, at least from the early postwar period to the present.

In support of this thesis, we may first note that it would be a mistake to infer, from the recent opposition to tax increases, that the public is not much concerned with the deficit. Between December 1984 and November 1985, when respondents were asked four times whether they felt that the federal budget deficit was a problem for the country, around 80% indicated they regarded it either as very serious (58%) or at least as fairly serious (22%) (Gallup International, 1984, 1985 [Q26]). In

September 1983, and again in May 1984, a similar question asked respondents how great a threat to the economy they felt the deficit was, and again it was found that 76% to 81% felt that it was either a great threat (46%), or at least somewhat of a threat (Gallup International, 1983, 1984 [Q25]).

More direct support for our contention of little change in attitude comes from evidence that the recent overwhelming opposition to higher taxes as the proper way of responding to a deficit (so apparently inconsistent with fiscal conservatism) is not a new phenomenon. As early as October 1949, Gallup asked a question fairly similar to that posed between 1981 and 1984, namely, "President Truman says the United States Government is spending more money than it is taking in and, therefore, federal income taxes must be raised next year. What is your opinion about raising federal income taxes next year?" Only 14% approved the proposal, with 76% rejecting it (Gallup, 1972 [Q5]). Earlier that same year, respondents were asked a basically similar question: Given that the government is now running a deficit and is expected to run an even bigger one next year, "which one of these three things do you think the government should do: (1) increase taxes; (2) cut down on expenses; (3) borrow whatever is necessary. . . ." Only 10% favored increasing taxes. (But interestingly enough, even fewer (9%) chose "borrow"—the overwhelming preference (71%) was "cut expenses" (Gallup, 1972 [Q4]).) A related question was asked some 10 years later in January 1959: "If the time should come when government income cannot pay for all the things in the budget, which would you favor—cutting back on certain things or increasing taxes?" Again, the proportion opting for tax increases was quite low—15%—with 72% favoring reduced expenditures (Gallup, 1972 [Q12]). Thus, the opposition to the use of taxes to close the deficit gap is not at all a novel feature of the last few years. When the question was posed some 30 and 40 years ago, the proportion favoring higher taxes was only between 10% and 15%, even lower than the recent one of 14% to 25%.

Correspondingly, there is evidence that the opposition to tax cuts when they result in a deficit is not limited to the Kennedy era and earlier. Although economic conditions were such that there was little occasion for polling the public on that issue, there is one item, asked in January of 1978, that has the requisite wording: "It has been said that tax cuts would lead to a bigger deficit in the federal budget and make it very difficult for the president to fulfill his promise to balance the budget by 1981. Do you think it is more important to work toward balancing the budget or to cut taxes at this time?" Those opposing cutting taxes again outweighed those favoring it (53% to 39%), although the margin is not quite as overwhelming as in the 1950s and 1960s (Gallup, 1979 [Q18]).

Thus, the evidence seems to point very clearly in the direction of no significant change in the attitude of the public toward public deficits and how to deal with them. Respondents have steadily regarded public deficits as serious and threatening to the future of the economy. They have steadfastly indicated a readiness to forego tax cuts that would result in deficits (sometimes even rejecting tax cuts when the budget was in surplus), *but* they have also overwhelmingly rejected tax increases as a recourse for reducing an existing deficit. But one may ask, "Are not these three sets of declared preferences mutually inconsistent?" It would seem, in particular, that foregoing tax cuts implies that one is willing to sacrifice current income to avoid deficits, while rejecting tax increases means that one is not.

In reality these replies need not be contradictory, and for two reasons. In the first place, those rejecting tax increases need not necessarily prefer a deficit to the loss of income—they might prefer the other possible way of closing the gap, namely, reduce expenditure. And, as was shown above, whenever respondents are given an opportunity to choose this alternative, a very large fraction does so. Furthermore, when the public is confronted with expenditures that are regarded as nonreducible, such as military expenditure for a popularly supported war, then an increase in income taxes tends to receive substantial support. Thus, when in October 1950 respondents were told that "To pay the costs of the Korean war . . . income taxes will have to be raised . . . or the government will have to borrow money and go deeper into debt," 51% thought the government should increase taxes and only 26% thought it should borrow (Gallup, 1972 [Q6]). A similar question asked in February 1951 finds 48% favoring higher taxes versus 24% favoring borrowing (Gallup, 1972 [Q7]).

In the second place, even if rejecting the tax increase meant choosing the deficit, this choice need not be inconsistent with rejecting a tax cut. Indeed, these choices simply imply that most of the public assesses the cost of foregoing a tax cut as being smaller than that of incurring a deficit, which in turn is assessed to be smaller than that of paying more taxes. This ranking is not inconsistent given a set of preferences that attach a high value to the status quo: giving up something one does not now enjoy may be less painful than giving up something one presently enjoys. If so, continuing to shoulder old taxes is less unbearable than shouldering new ones. Facing a deficit presumably lies in between.

These considerations, however, appear to point to a new puzzle. For if the budget-making process does not suffer from an *inherent* bias toward deficits and the public attitude toward deficits has not changed appreciably for many decades, why did the country shift more and more into deficits beginning with the turn of the 1960s?

The Role of Cyclical Factors and Inflation in the 1970–1980 Period

To solve the apparent puzzle, we suggest, to begin with, that despite appearances there really is no significant mystery for the years immediately preceding the Reagan administration, 1970–1980. There are two considerations supporting this assertion. The first is that the official budget figures are not always an accurate indicator of the fiscal stance, especially in the postwar period. Indeed, the difference between receipts and expenditures reflects not only the tax and transfer rates and other expenditures set by Congress, but also the ups and downs of business activity. These determine what receipts and expenditures actually materialize with the given rates. In general, it is known that the instability of the economy will be minimized if tax and transfer rates are not varied to counter the effect of business fluctuations on receipts, thus allowing the budget to go into deficit (or smaller surplus) when there is a contraction. This type of fiscal structure, which acts as a "built-in stabilizer" by causing deficits to rise when activity turns down, has been universally applied in the postwar period. Under these conditions, the most meaningful way to measure the fiscal stance of the government has proved to be the so-called full employment (or structural) surplus, i.e., the amount of surplus (or deficit) that would be generated by the existing tax, transfer, and expenditure structure at a level of income that corresponds roughly to full employment. As it happens, the 1970s, especially after the oil crisis of 1974, were a period of relatively high unemployment leading to substantial cyclical deficit. Correcting for this by replacing the actual deficit in a year with an estimated full employment deficit makes a substantial difference, up to 2½ percentage points in some years.

This can be seen from Figure 1, in which we represent by x's joined by a dotted line the "full employment" surplus or deficit, beginning with 1955—the first year for which the information is available. It is seen that in terms of this measure in the period 1955–1970, there were but 3 deficits of which only 2 are significant, 1967 and 1968, and these 2 in turn are largely the consequence of war financing in connection with the Vietnam War. By contrast, there still are 7 significant surpluses. This indicates that the Buchanan hypothesis of a post-Keynesian tolerance for fiscal imprudence is rejected by the evidence.

As for the period 1970–1980, there were deficits in the first five years, but once they are cyclically adjusted, they are insignificant—within the 1% range.

In the remaining years, however, even the cyclically corrected figures show a deficit that is significant in 5 years out of 6. But there are

good reasons why even these deficits might have failed to cause concern. The most important one is the role of inflation. Inflation tends to raise interest rates more or less by the rate of inflation. This, in turn, raises the total interest payment so that, taxes constant, the deficit appears to swell. But in reality the rise in interest rates merely offsets the inflation-induced loss of purchasing power of the debt—which is a loss for the creditor but a gain for the government. Thus, to measure the true interest cost of the government debt, one must subtract from total interest, and hence from the deficit itself, an adjustment equal to the product of the rate of inflation times the (net) debt outstanding. Between 1974 and 1981, inflation was appreciable in this country, running between 6% and 11% per year. Since the federal debt in that period was around one-quarter of GNP, the inflation correction is quite substantial: between 1½ and nearly 3 percentage points. With this correction, the deficit falls within the 1% margin in 10 years out of 11, while the remaining one shows a significant surplus!

We must conclude that up to 1980 the government continued to pursue, by and large, the conservative budget policy which prevailed since last century. This is confirmed by the fact that two common measures of the burden of the national debt, namely the ratio of (gross) debt to GNP and the (net) debt per capita in constant dollars, which began declining at the end of the war, continued their decline from 1970 to 1980, and in the latter year were at or close to their lowest value since the end of the war (Eisner, 1986).

It may be objected that while the public could be expected to have a rough understanding that deficits (and surpluses) of a purely cyclical character can be discounted, it is most doubtful that it would also understand, or know how to estimate, the appropriate correction for inflation. But this is not essential, for even if we confine ourselves to the cyclically adjusted series shown in the chart, it is easy to understand why the deficits even between 1975 and 1980 might not rate as a serious source of public concern: (1) the cyclically adjusted deficits were not very large—at most 2%, (2) some were the result of special measures intended to foster the recovery of the economy, (3) they were consistently decreasing in time so that by 1979 the amount was no longer significant, and (4) the public was occupied with much more serious concerns such as the high rate of unemployment and high inflation. Thus, when the public was asked by the Gallup Poll to indicate which was the most serious problem facing the country between 1970 and 1980, inflation and unemployment were typically mentioned by over 50% of the respondents, while government deficit or debt hardly gets mentioned (never more than 3%) (Gallup, 1980, 1981).

The Reagan Period—How the Explosion Came About

We thus arrive at the most recent years of the Reagan administration, 1981 to 1986. Here the picture is quite different: (1) the unadjusted figures show 6 huge deficits, (2) even the cyclically adjusted figures show 5 significant deficits out of 6, (3) beginning with 1983 the adjusted deficits are larger than any recorded in peacetime years, and (4) they show no sign of abating. The deficit adjusted for inflation, though a bit smaller, shows the same pattern, which is to be expected because inflation abated rapidly after 1981. We see all the indications of a sharp break with the conservative fiscal tradition.

How did such a sudden break come about, without any apparent change in public attitude and under a president whose major election campaign theme had been a crusade against the scourge of public deficits (which, ironically, were not really there, as the chart shows)?

To account for this baffling development, one must unravel two issues: (1) How did the administration and Congress manage, first, to slip into the deficit and then live with it for several years? and (2) Why did the public not rise up and demand an end to policies running counter to its own fiscal conservatism?

The key to the first puzzle seems to be the failure of the administration to realize the magnitude of the fiscal gap implied by the combination of both much lower tax rates and an increase in military expenditures—a failure convincingly depicted by Stockman (1986b) in *The Triumph of Politics*. Nor did it appreciate the difficulties associated with carrying out the cuts in expenditure that would be needed to prevent a further growth of the inherited deficit, especially after major items such as Social Security and interest payments were acknowledged as exempt from cuts. No doubt part of the delay in recognizing the problems came from the Laffer curve delusion: that cutting of taxes would have such a powerful effect on reducing tax evasion, on increasing work incentives, on encouraging both savings and investment, and ultimately on spurring economic expansion, that tax revenue might not fall much or might even increase. In fact, the growth rate turned out to be half as high as predicted, the tax revenue fell pretty much in line with the cut in rates, and, if anything, the saving rate fell. With the rising deficit cutting deeply into national savings, investment was at best maintained, and then only because it was financed by foreign capital, with traumatic consequences for the balance of trade.

Stockman himself gradually began to appreciate the impossibility of balancing the budget, while at the same time holding on to the tax cut. But the White House was not listening to his message, for there was no real willingness to face such unpleasant facts. Indeed, the tax reduction was so ideologically important and so popular that one could not

jeopardize it by acknowledging and broadcasting its implications for massive deficits or deep expenditure cuts. As Stockman puts it: "I underestimated how determined [the president] was to stand pat on the tax cut he had originally enacted that was too big" (Stockman, 1986a), and "the truth had been buried . . . deliberately, in order to win the tax battle" (Stockman, 1986b:332). And if in the end the unavoidable big deficit would eventually turn up, it "would become a powerful battering ram forcing Congress to shrink the welfare state" (Stockman, 1986c:59).

By the beginning of 1982 the Council of Economic Advisers, despite its overoptimistic forecasts, had to acknowledge that the administration's tax and expenditure plan was going to create a huge deficit in 1982, almost unmatched in peacetime, and that it would be a long-lasting one, but the Council tried to reassure the public that this deficit would shrink to just over 1% by 1987. To this end, the president was prepared to cut some nondefense expenditure, but he failed to reckon with the fact that this was precisely what Congress was not willing to do—it would rather have raised taxes, unpopular as that might be. But failing that, it would rather put up with a deficit than accept deep cuts in nondefense expenditure. Since taxes could not be raised or defense expenditures cut over the opposition of the president, and nondefense outlays could not be appreciably reduced over the opposition of Congress, living with a deficit became the only feasible compromise—until the situation became unsustainable.

In light of the opinion polls, the public's initial acceptance of a policy of tax reduction after years of official budget deficits is presumably explainable by its trust in a newly elected, conservative leader who had won in a landslide. The administration's argument that the tax cut, through the Laffer curve, would produce a vast improvement in the economy after the sluggish years of the oil crisis, may also have come to be accepted by many. Certainly the public was unaware that the tax reductions would generate enormous deficits, and it did not have any reason to suspect this because the policy was being recommended by a man who projected an image of unswerving opposition to government deficits.

This explains why the tax cut was supported even though, on the basis of opinion polls, the public could be expected to reject a cut avowedly to be financed out of deficits. Once the tax law had been put over and the huge deficits began to make their appearance, the initial failure to push for remedial action can be understood in terms of the asymmetric attitude of the public toward the use of tax reductions and tax increases as ways of warding off deficits. As on previous occasions, the public was just not willing to close the fiscal gap by paying higher taxes. It was this confluence of White House and public opposition that

prevented using the most natural remedy to an overdose of tax reductions—namely, reversing the cut.

There are indications that by rejecting a tax increase the public did not mean to endorse the deficit but rather to support cutting of government expenditure. But it is questionable whether there was enough consensus on which expenditures should be slashed and on whether they could be cut deeply enough to close the gap.[3] It is suggestive that when in May 1981 Gallup asked for a reaction to the cuts in spending proposed in the administration's budget—which were of course utterly inadequate to eliminate the deficit—only 12% of those polled thought they were too low as against 34% who labeled them as too high and 46% who viewed them as about right (Gallup International, 1981 [Q21]). In any event, the only program for which cuts have been repeatedly approved by a substantial majority has been National Defense (66% to 57% in favor versus 28% to 36% opposed), which happened to be the president's other sacred cow (Gallup International, 1983, 1985, 1986 [Q22]).

This lack of coherence, both within and between actors, that was needed to repair the harm done by the tax reform of 1981 would seem to explain the paralysis on remedial action that prevailed until 1985. One further cause of the acquiescence is most likely related to the public's failure to comprehend the true damage wrought by the deficit. To be sure, the deficit did produce the expected negative results. Interest rates skyrocketed and the balance of trade showed a massive deterioration, but the public was not led to connect these developments with the burgeoning deficit. Similarly, although the interest paid on the government debt rose substantially, the administration hid this from popular view by not increasing taxes and instead raising the needed revenue by more borrowing, thus further deepening the deficit. While remaining relatively unaware of these negative consequences, the public probably tended to assess the effects of the deficit by using the two indicators most commonly utilized in recent years to judge the performance of the economy: inflation and unemployment. In other words, they assumed that if the deficit was really bad for the economy, both these indicators should increase. Thus, in Gallup polls conducted

3. Recent studies of public attitudes on government spending and taxation fail to provide a coherent picture of the public's willingness to accept budget reductions commensurate with its desire to maintain or decrease levels of taxation. In reviewing a large body of national poll data, Ladd (1979) suggests that there are some major contradictions: "Public attitudes vis-a-vis . . . State . . . taxing and spending are splendidly ambivalent. Specifically, there is real resistance to taxation and real support for the services which taxation provides" (p. 132). On the other hand, Welch (1985), based on a specifically designed study conducted in one Midwestern state, finds that only a small proportion of her respondents favored a "free lunch"—an increase in government services coupled with neither budget reallocation nor an increase in taxes.

in September 1983 and May 1984, some 80% of respondents indicated that they regarded the deficit as a threat to continued economic recovery (Gallup International, 1983, 1984). This inference was, of course, quite wrong—deficits normally have little relation to inflation and should tend, if anything, to raise employment. Thus, when both inflation and unemployment continued to abate after the spurt in deficit spending, this came as no surprise to many economists but did not fit well with the public's stereotype. In addition, the tax reduction contributed to a sense of improved well-being, though this only reflected the "enjoy now, pay later" character of the public deficit. Taken together these factors might be expected to nurture a feeling that the deficit did not, after all, require such urgent mending.

The paralysis was finally broken only by the Gramm-Rudman bill which made the deficit reduction the government's fixed and unchangeable responsibility, to which all other priorities had to be subordinated. One may criticize many aspects of the specific bill, but that concept seems essential to getting out of the fiscal morass.

Summary and Implications

To summarize, the great deficits that began in 1982 are something altogether unparalleled in the fiscal history of the United States, except during major wars and depressions. They therefore cannot be attributed to any failure inherent in our budget-making process that could be overcome only by a balanced budget amendment. Nor can they be attributed to any fundamental change in the attitudes of the public; despite appearances, the opposition to government deficits has remained steadfast and stable as far back as public opinion polls are available. At the same time, though, this opposition does not rank as high as the antagonism to raising taxes as a way of reducing deficits (except in national emergencies).

The way the great leap into the red occurred nonetheless is through the large tax cut of 1981. The public accepted it on the belief, nourished by very persuasive administration arguments, that the tax reform would not be a serious source of deficit because of its powerful evasion-reducing and supply-stimulating effects, and because of generic forthcoming cuts in expenditure. It is somewhat of an open question whether the administration was entirely candid in making these claims or whether, instead, it felt justified in sacrificing candor to the higher goal of cutting taxes. Once the tax cut was enacted and followed by a hefty rise in defense expenditures, the deficit became evident, but no effective action to eliminate it could be pieced together because of the resistance to tax increases, the profound divisions about what expendi-

tures could and could not be cut, and the failure of the public to understand properly the costs of the deficit.[4]

Is there a lesson for the American people in this experience? One might suggest two. First, the American public should learn to mistrust extravagant claims about being able to have one's cake and eat it too, such as have been pushed by the administration and other prophets of the Laffer curve. Second, it should be leery of tax cuts until there is a surplus to be distributed, or until one is clearly in the making, through policies which have ample consensus.

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4. Paul E. Peterson (1985) concurs with our conclusion that the great leap in deficit financing must be laid on the shoulders of the administration rather than on any chronic shortcoming of the system. However, his conclusion rests more on the fact that "Congress seems to defer to the President on fiscal policy" than on the administration's success in misleading the public (and perhaps itself).

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Appendix: Opinion Items Referred to in the Text

(From Gallup Polls Unless Otherwise Noted)

Q1 (8/46): Will you tell me what is meant by "balancing the federal budget"?

Generally correct answer	49%
Incorrect answer	51

(Asked of those giving generally correct answers) Some people say that if we're going to balance the federal budget we've got to keep income taxes at the present rates. Others say it is more important to cut income taxes than to balance the budget. Which do you think is more important to do in the coming year—balance the budget or cut income taxes?

Balance budget	71%
Cut income taxes	20
No opinion	9

Q2 (11/46): Do you think the new Congress should reduce income taxes in 1947, or should this wait until some of the national debt has been paid off?

Wait	44%
Cut taxes	48
No opinion	8

Q3 (4/47): The United States today has a billion dollar surplus in its running expenses. Should this money be used to reduce income taxes, or should it be used to reduce the national debt?

Reduce debt	53%
Cut taxes	38
No opinion	9

Q4 (5/49): As you know, the government in Washington is now spending more money than it is taking in. The outlook for next year is that still more money will be spent than is taken in. In view of this, which one of these three things [on card] do you think the government should do: (1) increase taxes; (2) cut down on expenses; (3) borrow whatever is necessary—that is, increase the national debt?

Increase taxes	10%
Cut expenses	71
Borrow	9
No opinion	10

Q5 (10/49): President Truman says the United States Government is spending more money than it is taking in and, therefore, federal income taxes must be raised next year. What is your opinion about raising federal income taxes next year?

Against it, don't like it, opposed	46%
Taxes already too high	22
Cut government expenses instead	8
General approval: if needed, Truman probably right	14
Miscellaneous	6
No opinion	7

Q6 (10/50): Congress voted recently to increase taxes for all taxpayers. To pay the costs of the Korean War and our defense program, income taxes will have to be raised even more or the government will have to borrow money and go deeper into debt. Which do you think the government should do—increase income taxes still more, or borrow more money?

Borrow	26%
Increase taxes	51
Other answers	9
No opinion	14

Q7 (2/51): Our government in Washington plans to spend this coming year about $25 billion more than was spent last year for national defense. How do you, yourself, think this additional money for defense should be raised—mostly by an increase in personal income taxes, or mostly by borrowing money to be paid back later?

Borrowing	24%
Increasing taxes	48
Other	14
No opinion	14

Q8 (1/53): If the new Congress finds that it cannot balance the budget for this year and at the same time reduce income taxes, which do you think it should try to do first?

Balance the budget	67%
Reduce taxes	26
No opinion	7

Q9 (2/53): Some members of Congress argue that federal income tax should be cut ten percent beginning this July 1. Others argue that income taxes should not be cut until the budget is balanced. With which side do you agree?

Balance budget first	69%
Cut taxes first	25
No opinion	6

Q10 (7/53): The Republicans have said they will cut personal income taxes and business taxes next January. Some people say that if this is done, the budget could not be balanced. If this is the case, should taxes be cut in January or not?

Should not be cut	52%
Should be	36
No opinion	12

Q11 (1/56): If the government has any money left over after paying expenses, should this money be used to reduce the national debt or to reduce income taxes?

Reduce debt	49%
Reduce taxes	43
No opinion	8

Q12 (1/59): If the time should come when government income cannot pay for all the things in the budget, which would you favor—cutting back on certain things or increasing taxes?

Favor cutting back	72%
Favor increased taxes	15
No opinion	13

Q13 (6/62): Would you favor or oppose a cut in federal income taxes at this time, if a cut meant the government would go further into debt?

Oppose tax cut	72%
Favor	19
No opinion	9

Q14 (8/62): [Survey Research Center, Survey of Consumer Finances] President Kennedy proposed that income taxes should be reduced next year; what do you think of this proposal?

Good idea	65%
Bad idea	19
Depends	7
Don't know	9

Q15 (5/63): [Survey Research Center, Survey of Consumer Finances] Our government is considering a proposal to reduce income taxes next year; what do you think of this proposal?

	5/63	*8/63*
Good idea	65%	68%
Bad idea	17	11
Depends	4	7
Don't know	14	14

Q16 (9/63): Have you read or heard about the Kennedy proposal to reduce income taxes?

Yes	52%
No	48

(Asked of those who had read or heard about the proposal) How do you, yourself, feel? Do you favor or oppose a cut in income taxes now?

Favor	60%
Oppose	29
No opinion	11

Q17 (3/76): Would you favor or oppose a constitutional amendment that would require Congress to balance the federal budget each year, that is, keep taxes and expenditures in balance?

	3/76	*6/78*	*2/79*
Favor	78%	81%	78%
Oppose	13	11	12
No opinion	9	8	10

Q18 (1/78): It has been said that tax cuts would lead to a bigger deficit in the federal budget and make it very difficult for the president to fulfill his promise to balance the budget by 1981. Do you think it is more important to work toward balancing the budget or to cut taxes at this time?

Work toward balancing budget	53%
Cut taxes	39
Don't know	8

Q19 (3/80): A proposed amendment to the constitution would require Congress to approve a balanced federal budget each year. Government spending would have to be limited to no more than expected revenues, unless a three-fifths majority of Congress voted to spend more than expected revenue. Would you favor or oppose this amendment to the constitution?

Favor	67%
Oppose	13
Don't know	20

Q20 (4/81): Have you read or heard about the proposal for a constitutional amendment which would require the federal government to balance the national budget each year? A proposed amendment to the constitution would require Congress to approve a balanced federal budget each year. Government spending would have to be limited to no more than expected revenues unless a three-fifths majority of Congress voted to spend more than expected revenue. Would you favor or oppose this amendment to the constitution?

	4/81	*9/81*
Favor	65%	67%
Oppose	21	19
No opinion	14	14

Q21 (5/81): The Reagan Administration has called for cuts in the federal budget in a number of areas. Do you feel that the total amount of spending cuts that the Reagan Administration wants to make is too high, too low, or about the right amount?

Too high	34%
Too low	12
About right	46

Q22 (4/85): At present the federal budget deficit is running at the rate of over 200 billion dollars per year. Basically, there are only a few ways this deficit can be reduced. Please tell me whether you approve of each of the following ways to reduce the deficit. Cut defense spending? Cut spending for social programs? Raise income taxes? Cut entitlement programs?

	Cut Defense	*Cut Soc. Prog.*	*Raise Taxes*	*Cut Entit. Prog.*
		1/83		
Approve	57%	41%	18%	12%
Disapprove	36	52	77	83
No opinion	7	7	5	5
		12/84		
Approve	61%	41%	23%	11%
Disapprove	32	52	72	84
No opinion	7	7	5	5
		4/85		
Approve	66%	39%	18%	9%
Disapprove	28	55	76	87
No opinion	6	6	6	4
		1/86		
Approve	59%	42%	22%	9%
Disapprove	33	51	73	88
No opinion	8	7	5	3

Q23 (11/81): Economists are now predicting that there will be an 80 to 100 billion dollar deficit in the Federal budget for fiscal 1982. Do you think there should or should not be an increase in Federal income taxes to help reduce this deficit?

Should not be an increase in taxes	70%
Should be	19
No opinion	11

Q24 (9/83): It is estimated that the Federal government's budget deficit for fiscal 1984 will be as much as $200 billion—that is, it will spend more than it takes in—unless some steps are taken to reduce the size of the deficit. Do you approve or disapprove of raising income taxes as a way of reducing the deficit?

Disapprove of raising taxes	79%
Approve	14
No opinion	7

Q25 (9/83): For each item on this list, please tell me whether you think it will be a great threat, somewhat of a threat, or not much of a threat to continued recovery of the economy. The federal government's budget deficit?

	9/83	*5/84*
Great threat	42%	50%
Somewhat	34	31
Not much	13	10
No opinion	11	9

Q26 (12/84): In your opinion, is the current Federal budget deficit a very serious problem for the country, a fairly serious problem, not a serious problem, or is this something you haven't thought much about?

	12/84	*4/85*	*8/85*	*11/85*
Very serious	57%	58%	57%	61%
Fairly serious	21	23	21	23
Not serious	2	5	2	3
Haven't thought about	20	12	20	12

Q27 (8/85): Under a proposed constitutional amendment, any federal budget passed by Congress would have projected tax revenues that are equal to projected government spending unless a three-fifths majority of Congress voted not to do so. Would you favor or oppose this amendment to the constitution?

Favor	49%
Oppose	27
No opinion	24

Q28 (8/85): Would you approve or disapprove of raising personal income taxes to reduce the federal budget deficit?

	8/85	*11/85*
Disapprove	68%	67%
Approve	25	29
No opinion	7	4

CHANGE VERSUS CONTINUITY IN WEST GERMAN PUBLIC ATTITUDES ON NATIONAL SECURITY AND NUCLEAR WEAPONS IN THE EARLY 1980s

HANS RATTINGER

Abstract This article first describes trends of a few key data on public opinion on national security in West Germany since 1970, and then examines in some detail the development and structure of public attitudes on NATO's double-track decision and its implementation in the early 1980s. It addresses the problems of measuring such attitudes and interpreting relevant public opinion data in the light of levels of public awareness and of the personal importance of these matters for respondents. In that context, the results of some methodological experiments to ascertain the impact of question formats and wordings on response distributions for defense policy survey items are also presented. Generational replacement and partisan polarization hypotheses to account for the dynamics of these attitudes are compared. The main finding here is that growing dissent among the major parties over missile deployment has played a much greater role in realigning public opinion than has the coming of age of a predominantly antinuclear and antidefense "successor generation."

> One of the most ambiguous, imprecise and elusive aspects of security [is] that of the domestic factors influencing defense policies, doctrines and burdens. This . . . subject has generally been unexplored in traditional strategic studies. . . . As long as domestic consensus on these matters existed, there was no real pressure to address them; that idyllic state of affairs no longer exists. An important part of the public in our societies is no longer willing to trust governments or experts or even the media on matters of defense policy. (Bertram, 1983:1)

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Introduction

Political scientists in the United States have long realized the importance of public opinion on foreign policy and national security (see, e.g., Rosenau, 1961; Russett and Stepan, 1973). In the Federal Republic, on the other hand, there has been little comparable scholarly research for a variety of reasons: First, mass protest against West German rearmament, against its possible nuclear component, and against NATO membership was a transient phenomenon that occurred during a period when the course of the country's postwar foreign policy still had to be defined and consolidated. Second, national security concerns ranked low in public political priorities and debates in the 1960s and 1970s. This statement is not contradicted by the public attention that "Ostpolitik" received after the SPD-FDP government came to power in 1969, because this attention mainly consisted of widespread *support* for the new coalition's goals, and because the national security context of "Ostpolitik" never played a major role. Third, national security debates in the Federal Republic have largely been restricted to the elite level, and even there they have predominantly been reflective of technological and/or doctrinal innovations originating from the United States. Up to the late 1970s the almost complete absence of a national security nonelite "issue public" in West Germany was often lamented, so it is not surprising that public opinion on these issues was rarely polled or analyzed systematically.

According to the above quotation, this "idyllic state of affairs" is gone, the paradise of popular national security consensus "in our societies" has been lost. Like many similar assertions that could be heard in the past couple of years, this refers to many West European nations, not only the Federal Republic. Most such statements proceed from the extent and intensity of protest against NATO's December 1979 double-track decision to negotiate with the USSR about nuclear weapons in Europe and to introduce new American systems (Pershing II and cruise missiles) should these negotiations fail to produce substantial Eastern reductions, and against subsequent preparations for deployment of intermediate-range nuclear forces (INF) in Western Europe. This protest was taken by many observers as an indication of radical change that, depending upon ideological predilections, was interpreted either as a long overdue democratization of defense policy or as a dangerous erosion of its societal foundations.

Regardless of such divergent interpretations, the alleged "revolt of the masses" of the early 1980s made national security analysts in many countries "discover" public opinion and survey research, formerly not central to their attention, and it made pollsters aware of the market for such data. As a consequence of this rediscovery of "linkage politics"

(Rosenau, 1969), the war of words over the double-track decision and its implementation was not only fought with the public's response in mind, but also with key arguments being drawn from its purported preferences, and even about what these preferences really looked like.

In this process of discovering public opinion and survey methodology many defense policy experts and decision makers also borrowed an explanatory paradigm already well established in political sociology, i.e., generational replacement (see, e.g., Inglehart, 1977). This explanation holds that public mobilization over national security issues away from established policies is due to the coming of age of new cohorts that lack the historical experiences and values that have shaped the design and goals of postwar Western efforts to provide peace and security. This "successor generation" hypothesis, by the way, is equally popular with those who view the developments of recent years with concern as with those who express their sympathies (see, e.g., Szabo, 1983, 1984; Mushaben, 1984).

Preoccupied (as they mostly have to be) with political matters of the day, many decision makers and national security experts approach relevant public opinion data in a style which sometimes appears rather breathless. Chasing after the most recent polling results (that hopefully fit one's own views) is often preferred over detached and systematic evaluation and analysis. From their point of view, attitudes on INF deployment, for example, are probably yesterday's news, since this process has already been going on now for quite some time without massive civil unrest. What would count today for them is data on public reactions to SDI, analogous European schemes, the Reykjavik summit, etc.

In this report on public attitudes on national security affairs in West Germany in the early 1980s, no effort will be made to satisfy such craving for the most up-to-date information. Instead, an attempt will be made to put the data available about the experience with the double-track decision and with INF into perspective, looking for lessons to be learned and for answers to a few general but basic questions. These questions are as follows: First, is there really evidence of the asserted radical changes in mass opinion on national security since the double-track decision was taken? Second, is it true, as the "successor generation" hypothesis posits, that such attitudes are more clearly polarized along generational divides than along most other social and political cleavages? Third, to what extent is it possible to describe survey responses on these matters as genuine opinions, i.e., stable attitudes based upon information and experience, that could even be defended against dissenting opinions or counterevidence?

In the following three sections we will, therefore, first have a look at a few trends of public attitudes on national security since 1970. In the

second step the polarization of such opinions in the early 1980s along generational lines will be compared to that along partisan lines. Finally, the sensitivity of survey responses on the double-track decision and on INF deployment in Western Europe vis-à-vis variations of question wording will be demonstrated. In that context, we will also summarize data about the level of the public's information on these matters and will present results from experiments designed to influence responses on defense policy survey items by question formats and wordings. This is the only part where our own data will be used; otherwise this article relies on secondary analysis of data compiled from a multitude of sources for reports published elsewhere (Rattinger, 1985; Rattinger and Heinlein, 1986).[1]

Some Trends 1970–1984

In order to obtain a meaningful evaluation of the extent of changes in public opinion on defense policy in the early 1980s it is mandatory to have comparisons with earlier periods. If what has been said above regarding the discovery of this aspect of popular attitudes in the wake of the double-track decision is true, the scope for such comparisons obviously has to be limited. Prior to 1979 there was much less incentive to do this kind of polling, and what earlier data is available naturally does not refer to the subject matter of the more recent controversies. An abundance of up-to-date information on very detailed and specific aspects of defense-related attitudes stands in stark contrast to the relative paucity of comparable earlier findings that, moreover, mainly cover only broader orientations toward national security. Nevertheless, the longitudinal comparisons that can be made offer some useful insights.

In the past half decade one could often hear the argument that the surge of peace movement activities indicated a rapidly growing concern within the German population over the stability of peace. Figure 1 shows evaluations of the importance of economic problems and of the preservation of peace as political tasks for the Federal Republic from 1970 to 1984.[2] The difference in the order of magnitude of nominations

1. All Figures and Tables 1–3 of this article summarize findings from a large number of surveys taken by a variety of polling institutes. Without exception, these surveys were nationwide and among German nationals of voting age (i.e., 18 years and older). Numbers of respondents usually range from 1500 to 2000; occasionally sample size is only about 1000 to 1200. To maintain readability, complete question wordings are omitted from Table 1, and for the time series in Figures 1–4 there is no list of what institute supplied data for which years. This is fully documented in Rattinger and Heinlein, 1986, from which these tables and figures are condensed. Copies of these tables or of the underlying original reports by the survey research institutes will be supplied on request by the author.

2. The trend lines in Figures 1–4 have been computed by simple bivariate regression. For

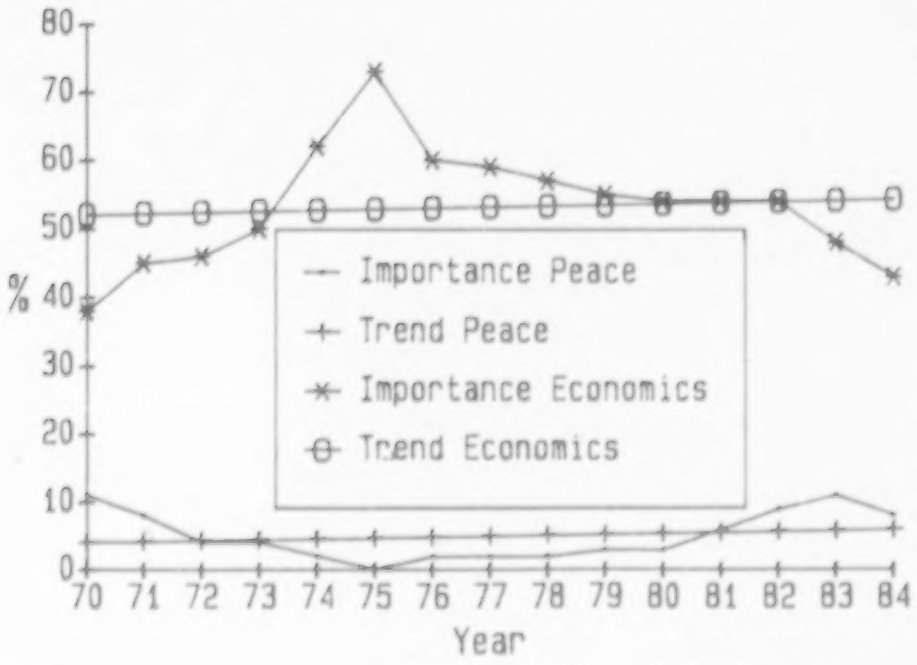

Figure 1. Attitudes on the Importance of Peace and of Economic Issues, 1970–1984.

Percentages of total responses for *peace* on the one hand and *economic issues* (i.e., unemployment, inflation, and economic growth) on the other hand to the question "In your opinion, what are currently the most important political problems for the Federal Republic?" Multiple responses (up to three) were allowed. *Source:* Rattinger and Heinlein, 1986: table 1; data from Forschungsgruppe Wahlen in Mannheim (FGW), Institut für Demoskopie in Allensbach (IfD), Sozialwissenschaftliches Forschungsinstitut der Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung in Sankt Augustin (SFK), Zentralarchiv für empirische Sozialforschung in Cologne (ZA).

for the two policy arenas speaks for itself. Considering that with open-ended questions of this sort a respondent on the average names about 2.5 political problems, it is obvious that each respondent is expected to name *at least* one economic problem, whereas the share of people volunteering the preservation of peace as a political problem for the Federal Republic never much exceeded 20%, usually even being much lower. That the overall percentage of nominations for "peace" from 1980 to 1983 increased from 3% to 10% is not really surprising and by no means resembles radical change; similar values could already be observed in the early 1970s. Moreover, in 1984 this share was already declining again. If one wants to know what a quick and strong redefini-

computing percentages for Figures 2, 3, and 4, "don't know," "undecided," and refusals were omitted. Mean values 1970–1984 are as follows: Importance Peace, 5; Importance Economics, 53; Warsaw Pact Stronger, 42; Military Threat, 52; Favor U.S. Withdrawal, 25; German NATO Membership, 61; Defense Possible, 49; Bundeswehr (very) Important, 74.

tion of popular priorities looks like, one can find it, instead, in the "importance of economics" curve that within two years soared from below 50% to well above 70% of overall responses when recession began to hit the Federal Republic in the wake of the increase of oil prices following the 1973 Middle East war.

During the debate over the double-track decision and its implementation it was also often asserted that one of the crucial changes in Western publics' attitudes was an increasing failure to recognize the Soviet military buildup and its consequences. Figure 2 demonstrates that this is somewhat of an overstatement for the West German population at large. Starting at under 30% in the early 1970s, the share of people perceiving Eastern military superiority has been oscillating between 40% and slightly above 50% since 1975, no systematic decline since 1980 being recognizable. Similarly, perceptions of a military threat emanating from the Eastern bloc, following a steady increase from 1970 to 1976 from below 40% to well above 50%, have since then fluctuated around 50%. The peak of 1980 most likely is reflective of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and maybe of the Iranian hostage crisis. Again, the data for the early 1980s indicate no reversal into a downward trend.

A third diagnosis frequently advanced within the framework of the "successor generation" hypothesis is that of pacifism, neutralism, and anti-Americanism spreading quickly in West Germany. Again, the development of mass opinion depicted in Figure 3 does not really support this diagnosis. Approval of German membership in NATO has increased rather consistently, reaching peak, and not minimum, values in the 1980s. In fact, support for NATO membership in the 1950s and 1960s usually was even lower than in the early 1970s, so that there has been a continuous upward trend for about three decades. The percentage of people favoring withdrawal of U.S. troops from Europe, on the other hand, declined over the 1970s. From 1980 through 1982 this demand again became somewhat more popular, but the level of the earlier 1970s was not reached, and the reversal of the trend did not last.

Figure 4, finally, shows popular evaluations of the importance of the Bundeswehr (Federal Armed Forces) for the Federal Republic and of the chances that the country could be defended militarily in case of aggression. The latter time series, again, exhibits no significant shift since the onset of the new defense debates. The fact that only about one-half of those who respond to such survey items believe in the possibility of successful military defense certainly reflects a considerable degree of skepticism, but that is not at all a novel phenomenon. Evaluations of the Bundeswehr as "important" or "very important" for the country are comparatively easy to make as long as such questions do not require trade-offs or ranking institutions as to their impor-

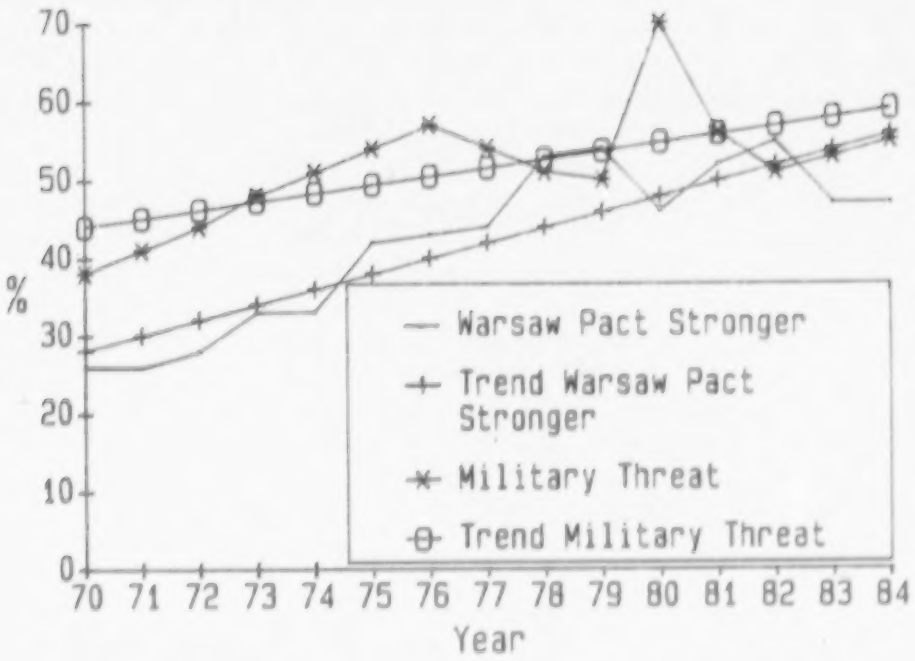

Figure 2. Attitudes on the Military Balance and the Military Threat, 1970–1984.

Warsaw Pact Stronger: Percentage replying "Warsaw Pact" or the "East" to the question "Who do you think is currently superior in military terms, NATO or the Eastern bloc, the Warsaw Pact, or are both equally strong?" *Source:* Rattinger and Heinlein, 1986: table 4; data from EMNID-Institut in Bielefeld (EMNID), FGW, IfD, Sozialwissenschaftliches Institut der Bundeswehr in Munich (SOWI).

Military Threat: Percentage indicating perceptions of threat in response to the question "What do you think, is the Federal Republic currently being threatened mil'arily by the East or not?" *Source:* Rattinger and Heinlein, 1986: table 6; data from FGW, IfD, Sozialwissenschaftliches Institut Nowak und Sörgel in Munich (SINUS), SOWI.

tance. The data in Figure 4, therefore, should not necessarily be read as reflecting great enthusiasm about the armed forces. What matters here, however, is that the decline visible in the early 1980s was not dramatic and did not lead to levels of support below those observed ten years earlier.

To sum up briefly the results presented so far: If one looks at a few key survey items on defense policy for which longitudinally comparable data are available, dramatic discontinuities in aggregate West German public opinion between the 1970s and the 1980s cannot be discerned. Instead, we observe a remarkable degree of stability—apart from a few outliers in our time series (like threat perception in 1980) that can plausibly be accounted for. To be sure, this statement refers to the West German public in total, whereas the "successor generation"